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Growth of Synthetic Lawn in Lamorinda

By Cathy Tyson



A puppy enjoying his brand new synthetic grass
Photos Cathy Tyson

Is it real or is it plastic? That perfectly green stuff sprouting up in Lamorinda yards may not be grass, but plastic. Nothing like lying on a lush green carpet of polyethylene and nylon to watch the clouds roll by.

This next generation synthetic lawn is not your mother's Astro Turf. It really does look and feel like the real thing, soft and comfortable under bare feet. Fake lawn owners tout its benefits: zero maintenance, zero watering, and very pet-friendly. Residents wanting to keep pesticide and fertilizer run-off out of our waterways and reduce lawn mower emissions have a "greener" alternative.

To turf or not to turf? For homeowners that prefer the real thing and wouldn't consider the up-front investment, going plastic is probably not an option. But for those with dogs that dig in the yard, mud issues, lots of shade or poor soil conditions, it's worth considering. Another plus is no discoloration from "liquid deposits" from the family pooch.

Due to high usage, all Lamorinda high school stadium fields have made the transition to synthetic turf. "Between 8:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. every day the stadium fields are used by P.E., football, soccer, lacrosse - you name it. Never a game cancelled because of a rain out - at least not

because of the turf conditions," said Steve Fishbaugh, Director of Maintenance, Grounds and Transportation for the Acalanes Union High School District. "Miramonte was the first field to switch back in 2000. It really is nice, and not a lot of maintenance."

Clearly they are not the only ones installing it. "Around the world demand for artificial turf is growing at 20% per annum according to a recently published study by leading industry consultants, Applied Market Information Limited," noted a report from The Association of Synthetic Grass Installers.

For builders or homeowners seeking a LEED certification - synthetic grass can contribute to the Green Building Council's LEED points by reducing overall irrigation demand on a property.

The grass is not 100% greener on the other side of the fence. Synthetic turf can be a heat island - hotter than regular grass. Dave Garcia of PaverPro, a full service landscape firm explains, "The shape of our grass blades is what separates us from the other guys. The blades are curved to deflect heat - coupled with a lower pile that creates less heat."

There was some concern with earlier incarnations of turf. The Consumer Product Safety Commission weighed in on synthetic athletic fields and found that new fields had no lead or generally had very low lead levels in a July 2008 report. A recent study analyzed 102 athletic fields in New York City. Lead levels for 96% of the fields were less than 100 parts per million. The acceptable EPA level for lead in soil is 400 parts per million.

Although it's completely recyclable, if a homeowner wanted to remove synthetic grass, there are a few steps involved. "If someone wanted to remove it they could contact any company that also installs turf - or a local recycling center if removed by themselves. Once removed, the remnant pieces can be made into pet pads or door mats. The recycled turf can then be re-extruded for use in any plastic product. The decomposed granite is also recyclable and can be mixed in with concrete to create recycled base rock or into pathway material," said Garcia.

The most significant downside is the price. It's more expensive than sod installation, but proponents argue you save money in the long run due to low maintenance expense. Depending on the volume, site access and prep needs - synthetic law can run from \$12 - \$18 per square foot.

According to Michael Parten, Certified Landscape Contractor and Store Manager at Orchard Nursery in Lafayette, natural sod professionally installed over prepared dirt costs approximately \$2 per square foot. However, for homeowners who need their existing lawn removed and replaced with new sod, plan on about \$10 per square foot - both of these options don't include sprinklers. When you add in the cost of sprinkler installation at \$1 per square foot, the difference between synthetic lawn and natural grass is reduced. Throw in savings from not paying a gardener to mow and the two options seem almost comparable.

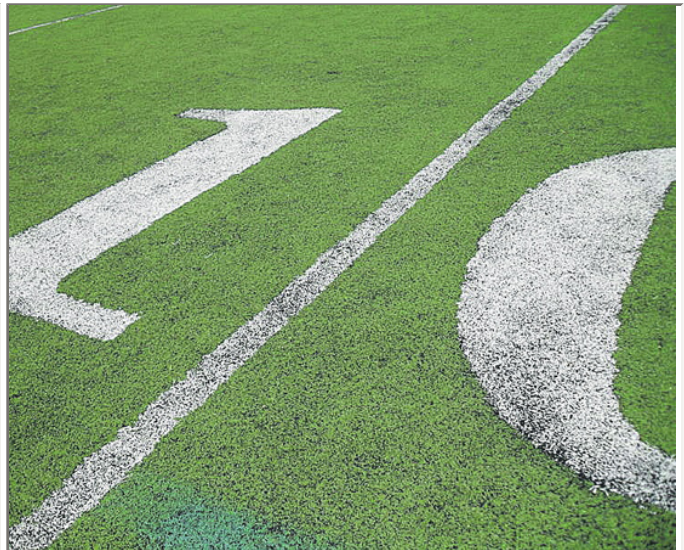
For more information call Orchard Nursery at (925) 284-4474 or PaverPro at (888) 883-8184.



Front yard with synthetic grass Photos Cathy Tyson



Real grass still tickles feet at Saint Mary's College



PaverPro Synthetic Lawn Installation Process

Excavate 4' down and take out existing dirt and sprinklers.

Put down landscape filter fabric - to keep soil from migrating

Lay a 3" bed of decomposed granite and bender board edging to staple the finished product to.

Roll out synthetic lawn and let it sit in the sun to let it relax and make installation easier.

Roll out and cut to shape - install

Brush with a power broom.

Add green acrylic sand or rubber infill - that adds ballast and extends longevity. This step is optional. A 50%/50% blend of sand and rubber is now available as infill

Sod Installation Process

Measure the area and order appropriate square footage

Prepare soil - cultivate the area by roto-tilling or spading approximately 4" - 6" down

Install the grass - start placement of sod along the longest straight line, like a driveway or sidewalk and work toward the middle

Water immediately until sod is very wet. It's critical to keep underlying soil moist for two weeks until turf is well rooted

Stay off the grass for the first couple of weeks

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